

February 15, 2007

The Honorable Larry Gossett
Chair, King County Council
Room 1200
C O U R T H O U S E

Dear Councilmember Gossett:

This transmittal provides a comprehensive plan and timeframe for an entirely vote by mail election process. This plan is the first in a series of elections reports that will be sent to the Council in response to Ordinance 15523 adopted in June 2006. It also responds to Motion 12299 and to a proviso in the 2007 adopted budget.

The enclosed plan moves the county forward in transitioning to a vote by mail process and builds on an earlier report King County Elections presented to me in February 2006 that provided the initial analysis of a move to all-mail voting. The enclosed plan includes a detailed timeline with tasks, milestones, and dependencies of a phased-in work plan for an anticipated implementation for a non-countywide special election in the spring of 2008. In addition, it also reflects many of the very positive changes already underway in the REALS division that will enhance the voting process and make the transition move smoothly.

The successful transition to vote by mail hinges on involvement and decisions by members of the King County Council and input from important stakeholders like the Citizen's Election Oversight Committee, the King County Democratic and Republican parties, King County Election's Disability Advisory Committee, the Secretary of State, jurisdictions, and most importantly our voters. Many of those decision points are outlined in this report.

One of the most important functions of our general government is to ensure our citizens have a voice. This is accomplished with a fair, accurate and accessible system in which its people can confidently cast a ballot and vote on key issues and races before them. We

have all worked diligently over the last few years to achieve this goal. King County currently has approximately 990,000 registered voters, some of whom have, in the past, cast ballots at neighborhood polling places staffed by paid poll workers. The majority, 62 percent, currently are permanent absentee voters. Each year, the number of voters who cast a ballot by mail steadily increases, and not just in King County but across Washington State and down the West Coast. Because of the number of voters in King County, and because managing 4,000 poll workers and 509 polling locations around the county presents many complexities, the Metropolitan King County Council directed the Record, Elections, and Licensing Services Division to complete a comprehensive plan and timeframe for establishing an entirely vote by mail system. The enclosed report responds to this request by the Council.

The information presented in this report contains data and research from jurisdictions of similar size, including counties in Washington and lessons learned from other large jurisdictions across the country including vote centers in Larimer County, Colorado and Harris County, Texas. This group did extensive research and analysis of regional voting centers, ballot drop-off locations and upgraded ballot tabulation solutions – components for the transition to an all-mail voting system. The research was instrumental in developing this thoughtful, phased-in approach based on first-hand testimony by election jurisdictions.

This report provides a comprehensive approach and gives the Council information necessary to make informed decisions on changes and directions to make the transition and meet our goal of an April 2008 implementation.

When King County does move to vote by mail, voters will experience a streamlined and efficient system. Added benefits in this effort will include the ability for voters to verify on line that their ballot was received and to have the ballots counted more quickly. In addition to added transparency, voters will have the convenience of voting at home and will also have an accessible way to vote or deposit their ballot, if they so choose. Extensive outreach, education and public information will be needed to inform voters of the transition to vote by mail. Our plan calls for outreach and education to begin at least four months prior to the first vote by mail (VBM) election. Internal and external communications plans are being created and initial meetings have taken place with some key stakeholders. Implementation requires a mailing to all voters 90 days prior to the first election conducted entirely by mail, but is not limited to this mailing in terms of outreach.

The following is a summary of key issues presented in the attached report that require resolution to ensure a smooth transition to vote by mail:

- **Identifying and creating ballot drop-off locations**
Ballot drop locations can provide voters the opportunity to return their ballot to King County Elections without using postage. It is recommended that several

such secure sites be identified throughout the county based on specific criteria. Criteria regarding security of ballots and examples of location of these sites are included in this plan.

- **Establishing and locating regional voting centers**

Regional voting centers (RVC) will offer many of the same benefits offered at a current polling location. Voters will be able to return their voted mail ballot or cast their ballot using an accessible voting unit at any RVC in the County. This report outlines criteria for regional voting centers including a staffing model, services provided, operational procedures, security, technology needs, and capital and operating costs for a regional voting center.

I urge the Council to review and consider the criteria laid out in the report, and approve the enclosed motion adopting that criteria and directing King County Elections to form a Regional Voting Center Consulting Group to provide ballot drop off and RVC location recommendations to the Council by July 27, 2007. The RVC Consulting Group would be composed of: two members from the Metropolitan King County Council staff, two members from the King County Citizens' Election Oversight Committee, two members from King County Elections; one member each from the Disability Advisory Committee, and King County Elections' Voting Rights Act Section 203 Community Coalition.

- **Ballot tabulation upgrade solutions**

One of the phases in the transition to a vote-by-mail system is the implementation of an upgraded ballot tabulation system. This report provides an analysis of the available technology and lays the groundwork for the business case report, which will be provided to Council no later than March 30, 2007.

- **Ballot tracking**

Automated ballot tracking and accountability will significantly improve the efficiency of King County Elections in reconciling ballots, a process and efforts that have gained national recognition for the county. And, for the first time, automated ballot tracking and accountability will allow voters to track their ballot as it moves through the elections process enhancing voters' ability to verify participation and increase their confidence in the process. Voters will be able to follow their ballot online and have updates on its progress at various points in the system. This automated system will allow for easier data access and analysis. Though a business case for ballot tracking is not included in this report, transition staff are researching existing ballot tracking business processes and will be attending demonstrations of current technologies and hardware solutions in the next 30 days. This effort will be provided in a business case due to the Council by May 15, 2007.

Three oversight groups (CEOC, Independent Taskforce and Election Center) agree that conducting elections by mail will improve elections and allow King County to focus its efforts on the vote by mail system. This shift will improve ballot tabulation, mail ballot tracking, and the transparency of elections and align the county with the other 34 Washington counties already conducting their elections entirely by mail. Lastly, this change will give voters on-line tools to verify that their ballot was received and processed.

I directed formation of a project team to manage King County's transition to all mail voting. The Transition Team is charged with implementing vote by mail and administrative responsibilities. This project team is comprised of subject matter experts from within the county's Election Section and a consultant team experienced in change management, organizational effectiveness and outreach.

The Transition Leadership Team, made up of election experts and administration staff, serve as the project's steering committee. This leadership group is staffed by the six-person Transition Team (project team) responsible for moving the project forward during the ongoing election cycle. They also receive guidance from Waldron & Company, consultants experienced in change management, organizational effectiveness and public relations.

Transition activities – including outreach and education – are under way.

In terms of staffing, it is important to note that this report assumes the director of Records, Elections and Licensing Services Division and the Superintendent of Elections will be hired and confirmed by the Council by January 1, 2008 for system implementation in April, 2008. I am confident that we will have these positions filled well within that timeframe.

Next steps

There are several key legislative steps that are critical to our ability to successfully move forward with King County's successful transition to all mail voting. They are listed below and require legislative action.

- Adopt the enclosed proposed motion to accept the RVC plan and criteria and approve formation of a Regional Voting Center consulting group to provide the Council with location recommendations for RVCs and ballot drop-off locations by July 27, 2007.
- Changes to King County Code provision regarding precincts. A proposed ordinance recommending this amendment has been provided in a separate transmittal. Transitioning to vote by mail requires changing the calculation that determines the number of registered voters in each precinct. Currently permanent

absentee voters are subtracted from the precinct totals to determine poll site voters; this is no longer possible once we transition to vote by mail. County code must be amended so the number of active registered voters in each precinct is consistent with the state limit; this will enable King County to keep approximately the same number of precincts under a vote by mail system. If this legislative change is not made, 1,200 new precincts and more ballot versions will be required, adding a level of complexity, time and cost that is very difficult to manage.

Elections represent a vital voice for our public. It is imperative these enhancements and changes to our system move forward. I urge you to pass the motion and ordinance outlined above so we can keep the momentum of this historic transition moving forward. My office and the REALS Division, working together with the Council, will keep our stakeholders and public informed of these important improvements as we move toward a successful vote-by-mail program.

I am pleased with the considerable progress we have made to boost public confidence in King County's election process. This report is the initial plan in a series of reports to be provided to you in 2007. Your continued cooperation, involvement and support are vital to the success of this effort.

Sincerely,

Ron Sims
King County Executive

Enclosures

cc: King County Councilmembers
 ATTN: Ross Baker, Chief of Staff
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 Anne Noris, Clerk of the Council
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